



# **COMMON THREADS IN PANDEMIC TIMES:**

REFLECTIONS  
ON THE  
CRISIS,  
FROM THE  
ILLAWARRA

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## Acknowledgement of Country

Gong Commune recognises that all emancipatory projects in Australia must begin with the self-determination of Aboriginal people. We meet and organise on the lands of the people of the Dharawal and Yuin Nations, lands that have never been ceded. We acknowledge that the struggles against dispossession and colonialism, and for self-determination, community, Country and sovereignty by First Nations people have been waged since European invasion and continue with great strength to this day. We pay respects to all Elders past, present and emerging of the Dharawal and Yuin peoples, to all First Nations people and to Country. We seek to listen and learn.

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prior to starting this project, we were confronted with a radical alteration of how we spent time together. As we separated from each other physically and left our homes as little as possible, we felt an odd mix of both isolation and deep connection. The seemingly endless news cycle and the daily

# INTRODUCTION

## Here on Dharawal and Yuin Country

the pandemic came quickly on the heels of the bushfire crisis. It was not long after we stopped having to breathe smoke that we were having to consider what it meant to breathe together in shared space. Suddenly, across the continent over a million people lost their jobs, anti-eviction struggles took shape and the queues to get on welfare payments stretched around the ablock.

The economic downturn was fixed well before the pandemic. But with the first local outbreaks in so-called Australia, we heard on the news that a recession like the post-war recession almost a century ago was about to hit. The framing became of a 'pandemic induced' recession. What would that mean for our lives and for the many struggles around us? How were people in our extended networks coping, negotiating, watching and learning as these multiple edges to the crisis of capital continued to unfold?

Back then, in April 2020, the reality of disaster upon disaster had already produced a sense of exhaustion, which was amplified by the uncertainty of the pandemic. During the weeks

infection figures represented some of the ways in which we are connected to each other. But the frenzied discourse offered no easy way to know how people were living day to day.

It was, and still is, difficult to get a sense of the details of changes to everyday life – the arrangements of care and household labour, how people were organising in their neighbourhoods and how people were understanding this strange, apparent rupture to what some had previously taken for granted – having a job, being able to pay rent, being able to travel between towns or states, access to food and common items. Many of us never had the security of good incomes or mobility of easy travel, and so there are many aspects to the present crisis that have simply made visible to more people conditions that were previously hidden to them in plain sight. It will be the struggles against inequality, colonialism and poverty that steer us through the present pandemic, as these are the conditions that are enabling the virus to propagate.

In a crisis, people self-organise. As we discovered throughout this project, care and solidarity are foundational to most people's day-to-day lives and

these networks grow and assume more significance to deal with disaster. Much like during the bush fires, the response to the pandemic involved widespread practices of care, mutual aid and collectively organised measures. As epidemiologists and business lobbyists argued over school closures and mask guidance, actions that could reduce transmission were taken by ordinary people, debated and clarified in online forums, homes and shop floors, and new social adaptations rapidly flourished. These processes often involved challenging debates and confrontation. Many people held uncomfortable conversations as class divisions were stoked by the state and media to 'teach us all a lesson' through seeking to make a scandal of young people, social housing residents or racialised migrants. [\[More on mutual aid in 3: Crisis of care/work\]](#)

The virus, like the fires, stirred up an alarming war rhetoric, even among so-called Left perspectives. Suddenly we were told that 'we are all in this together:' ordinary people and the bosses united for a common cause. There was bipartisan support for a range of 'emergency' measures to support the flailing economy. Unemployment benefits were doubled to make sure that the huge influx of workers into unemployment would continue to pay their rents and mortgages, and keep buying stuff. Colonial borders (domestic and international) became even tighter sites of restriction, displacing migrant workers and international students into even more tenuous situations. [\[more in 4: Borderlines\]](#)

A new scheme called JobKeeper was introduced in an attempt to tie some workers to their employers

by subsidising wages, i.e. paying employers and extending the precarity of casuals, workers on temporary visas or who are undocumented. The central importance of the property market to the economy was shown in declarations to calm flighty investors, a toothless moratorium on evictions was announced and lowered interest rates incentivised people to keep borrowing. [\[more in 5: Rent Strike!\]](#) Further, a stimulus package for the construction industry, Homebuilder, was announced, enabling only those spending huge amounts on renovations to get a discount.

For certain, some of these emergency policies benefited some people in very tangible ways – we fight for the 'double dole' to stay! However, learning from past periods when Keynesian economic policies were in vogue, we can see that welfare policies have been hard-won class compromises as well as tools by which to regenerate capital accumulation. The Government wasted no time in making clear that the emergency relief policies would be temporary and that we should all buckle up for the austerity to come. [\[More in 2: Getting paid'\]](#)

Amidst all of this, the day-to-day activities of caring for ourselves and one another have come into focus. Practices of care occupy a powerful contradiction in capitalist social relations. Care is fundamental to how we support each other, produce better lives, and build autonomy within, against and outside of commodified relations. And yet, care when it is turned into a service commodity is subject to the same tendencies of all labour in capitalism – stretched and



squeezed in order to make it more profitable. Feminised and racialised people, particularly on temporary visas, are over-represented among the workforces of aged care, disability support sectors and other vital services such as cleaning and food preparation. Initial and current threats to working conditions, funding, job cuts and visa conditions in these sectors are compounding the crisis of care. The importance and the systemic devaluing of these activities has been so clear throughout the pandemic. As capital seeks to recuperate, free care done for and with love will be drawn into deeper tensions with struggles to be paid a decent wage and to reproduce the conditions of our collective existence. [More in 3: Crises of care/work]

With the household as the focal point of life throughout the pandemic to date (at times literally being locked in our homes), crises in work, money, health, and care have compounded. During the first covid-19 outbreak in Wollongong, the household was an intense place of production, circulation and reproduction. Kids did classes from the kitchen, people skived off zoom calls to bake bread, neighbours called to distribute toilet paper – all of these meme-worthy moments were quite real for many people back then. And they showed us that in a crisis, the household cushions the blows. Grave reports of increased domestic and family violence also emerged. Over these early months of the pandemic, efforts to reach beyond our households went some way to break with the responsibilisation of individuals for our exposure to risk. For example, a mutual aid fund in Wollongong

redistributed cash to people in violent situations at home or who could not access Centrelink or other social security. Of course, there were countless acts of support and care both online and on the streets too. [More in 3: Crises of care/work, mutual aid]

While people in the Illawarra have only experienced one lockdown, just 700km down the road in Melbourne, people are living through a protracted and militarised lockdown. In Sydney, Black Lives Matter protests and protests about higher education cuts have been violently attacked by NSW police. This shows us that the concerns people were expressing in April, about the use of police to enforce the Public Health Act and the predictable targeting of poor and racialised communities, were justified. [More in 4: Borderlines, 1312]

Anticipating the deepening of the crisis, in April we thought it would be useful to conduct a kind of investigation that learned from the traditions of workers' or militant inquiry, or conriciera in the Italian workerist tradition, or inverting our periscopes as the Zapatistas would say. We did not set out to develop a 'representative' picture, but to give space to descriptive personal insights of a pandemic in its first four months. We approached people, many of whom we barely knew, but who we thought would be experiencing things in different ways – carers for elderly people or for children, or people who themselves access care workers, or who provide other forms of essential services such as circulating commodities through supply chains or feeding people. We also reached out to people who we knew had lost work

or their housing because of the crisis. We ended up interviewing ten people, all of whom have a connection with 'the Gong.' Wollongong is a deindustrialising city, small by global standards, built on the Country of Yuin, Dharawal and Wodi Wodi peoples on the eastern coast of so-called Australia. Knowledge, commonality and political insight are produced through collective inquiry and practical activity. In the practice of militant inquiry, there is no distinction between the 'researcher' and the 'researched,' and no all-knowing specialist seeking to impart truth to others. Instead, militant co-research begins from the premise that people are the experts of their own experience. From this viewpoint, the multiple contradictions, joys, grievances, antagonisms, modes of exploitation, forms of cooperation, care, resistance and refusal that animate everyday life are the experiences and the substance of the struggle to transform society. It is our perspective that during crisis these everyday practices of disaster communism persist and grow. It is hard to know the significance of events while

living them, but we have sought to draw out common threads of struggle through which to suggest where we can go from here. We think of revolution not as a sudden moment of rupture, dangling forever on the horizon, but as a process in which we are already involved. We are all now living an acute experience that continues to take shape. What is certain is that seismic shifts are happening around us and the form they take will be influenced by the struggles we wage. But understanding change as we live it is difficult, and many of the interviews describe conditions that have already changed. [More in 6: A strange present] We think we can learn from this bizarre and brutal, joyful and uncertain period.

We put this together on Dharawal and Yuin land, where people have faced the colonial virus for over 250 years. The capacity of people to organise and resist whilst facing violent and destructive invasion is present everywhere on this Country [1], and we wish to acknowledge those who fought and still fight.

#### [Endnotes]

1. We refer to the place we live as Country in honouring local Aboriginal ways of conceptualising and relating to where we are. Country may be understood as a set of intimately interconnected relationships that afford humankind an equal place to all other entities within an integrated ecosystem – <https://gongcommune.wordpress.com/climate-crisis-is-here/on-this-country/>

# GETTING PAID



## Shocks

With the first local outbreak, most people knew someone who had lost their job or had their shifts cut. Reme worked at a restaurant at the beginning of the year. She recalled that,

It was so busy and in just a few days all the restaurants shut down. It was completely busy, like it was so busy and we were working full time... but after the news they said like 'hey guys... the roster for next week is gonna be just the manager, one chef and the owner.'

On the docks, imports into Sydney had already declined because goods coming from other places had slowed down or ceased production. It took a few weeks for Tommy and his workmates to clock what this would mean for them.

Initially when [covid-19] first came up, we were just talking about it like the latest thing in the news. And then as it became more frequent, because most of our ships come from China, people started like, 'Oh, I wonder if it's gonna affect us.' And then we actually started seeing the effects. Like, our ships from Hong Kong were being delayed because it was just starting to have some impacts over there with manufacturing and I think the same with how they load the containers over there, something was getting affected over there, which then came and affected us.

By the end of February, workers at Port Botany started to have their shifts cut. This was for a few reasons, as Tommy explained,

Initially the ships just stopped coming altogether especially when it started getting, when things were really hectic in Wuhan, so they just closed down the country altogether. So we didn't get that weekend ship for about five weeks, I think.

That just stopped for at least five weeks. And then even when it came back and had to start doing the 14 day isolation, it pushed it right out of the window, to the point it was arriving during the week. So we basically lost all our weekend work and on top of that, some of the other lines and that line, as

well dropped in volume. So they weren't carrying as many containers and they weren't taking as many containers. So we lost work then, so we're only working the one ship. And so we're getting the ship away faster, therefore not working as many shifts. So we lost work through that too.

Dianne works at a small community pre-school in Wollongong. She remembered that,

At the beginning we were concerned about what was going to happen, were we going to be closed, so how were we going to maintain the finances of the preschool, how were we going to continue to pay wages and support the educators and their families, how were we going to maintain full enrollments while respecting that the financial situations of families had drastically changed (potentially).

JobKeeper, the policy that subsidised workers wages by paying employers to keep them on, was helpful in Dianne's eyes.

The pressure came off to some extent when the JobKeeper was offered, however the strings that were attached to that were quite complex. So, our billing pattern is per term, so all of the fees for term 1 had [already] been paid irrespective of whether people choose to attend or not.

Ultimately, they were able to keep some people on at the pre-school, while casuals were stood down.

# [ 1. GETTING PAID ]

As the pandemic set in, it was immediately clear that contestations over paid and unpaid work, working hours, safety conditions and unemployment would intensify. As had been observed in other places where the pandemic had already resulted in lockdowns, covid-19 provoked a kind of slowdown as workplaces and schools were closed and we all restricted our movements. A sifting and categorising of types of waged labour into 'essential' and 'non-essential' services formed the ground upon which new struggles would emerge. Being designated 'essential' mostly meant continuing to be paid low wages (in cleaning, warehouses, at checkouts, bedsides or behind the wheel), and thus having to put oneself and loved ones at greater risk of exposure to a viral threat that was (and still is) scary and unfamiliar. Work within households of all kinds also intensified as we 'locked down' in the Illawarra from April to May.

The fast food chains didn't slow down over this period though. Lily felt that her bosses were quick to adapt to contactless delivery, requiring less staff to be put on.

I think fast food is one of the rare cases during this epidemic that has not lost a lot of revenue just because we can do that contactless delivery and still produce and make money. If anything, it might be just that we don't have as many people on...

In the times that I have tried to engage with my co-workers, the manager will often come around and say 'if you have time to lean, you have time to clean' and separate us and go off and do other jobs.



Lauren felt that her job within the public healthcare system is probably as secure as they come these days. She described feeling a strange form of guilt because of that.

Especially with jobs there's this guilt, maybe. Seeing all these people that you know who are losing their jobs and just feeling guilty about that, about having a job.

Having been sick with covid-type symptoms at the time, Lauren was getting mixed messages from work. Her sick leave was maxed out already and even in a fairly secure job, she felt that the atmosphere was tense.

Also, because I'd rather not be there and be exposing myself to getting sick, I don't want to lose my job obviously, but I wish I could stay home for a couple of months, and feeling guilty about that. It's shit. And just how friggin' unpredictable it is, like so many of those jobs you would have thought they were just safe, safe jobs.

### Intensification

The pandemic crisis has resulted in the rapid and complete loss of paid work for many, and the intensification of paid and unpaid work for others. While some people were losing their jobs or having shifts cut, others were suddenly having to do much more in the home and at the workplace, the location becoming the same for many people. Recalling the situation in schools, Sue, a high school teacher, said,

Yeah, the workload increased. Because on the days when I was working at home, I really tried to make sure I spoke to every student every day. That was a lot. It was a lot of work to prepare materials because they needed to have highly explicit instructions that you would give face to face but this time it had to be written.

People working in various social services found themselves in a similar position, checking the daily shifts in government policy became a big part of the job. Grace says it was a day-to-day process in April.

Even the fact that the law was changing so rapidly on us, I was having to spend so much time out of my work hours purely catching up on press releases or on law changes.

At one of the Illawarra's poorer public schools, the strength of bonds between staff was really crucial in ensuring that staff could make the best decisions in the chaotic environment.

During the lockdown 50% of our staff were on the school site at any one time. So we would try to chat in between making all these continuous phone calls to the students. Yeah, we would have staff meetings or faculty meetings weekly and that was using zoom. So usually we'd have half the staff at school, the other half at home and we would meet up on zoom. Everyone was very supportive of each other. So there was plenty of communication and reassurance that we were doing our best in a difficult time.

For Dianne there was a lot of extra work involved in administering JobKeeper too.

Where they'd normally have had six or seven staff on, at the pre-school they cut the number of staff on site by half. And also with the Jobkeeper, there was extra work in tracking staff attendance. Where they'd normally have had six or seven staff on, at the pre-school they cut the number of staff on site by half. And also with the Jobkeeper, there was extra work in tracking staff attendance.

### 100% Plus

As the economy slowed and the pandemic spread, a lot of us were told by our bosses that we were 'in this together' and everyone needed to look after each other. But the company bottom line has never been a basis for unity, instead functioning as a measure of discipline as production rates must be maintained or grow, regardless of the situation. In most cases this was hard to achieve, and was resisted by many.

Talking about social and healthcare services, Grace described her experience,

We were expected to continue to function, not even at a hundred percent of our function, but also do all this extra work. I remember talking to my colleagues about it. We were expected to be doing a lot more work, a lot more intense work at work... We were taking a lot more distressed calls than normal. We were taking on all of that energy and still being expected to turn that

call over in 15 minutes and stick to the same numbers as normal. If you don't keep to that same level, there's a threat that you would lose your funding, and that you might lose your job.

At the Steelworks, day shift workers like Alex felt that work was continuing more or less as normal.

We are still having night-shift, so our operations run 24/7, and so our night shift guys are still on night shift cos that's their normal roster. It's just on what they call red rosters where basically each of your work crews have to have a day off, where [we are] not running assets we don't need to work on those days. I think that's pretty standard though. I don't know that's necessarily changed much. I know a lot of our administrative staff have been able to work from home and so have worked from home. I think that's probably the biggest change we've seen.

In April, Alex said there had been some modifications to conditions, which aimed to make workers' hours regular and stop voluntary overtime.

The Steelworks have sort of had a policy from the get-go of trying to keep as many people in their regular roles and regular hours as possible... They're not allowing voluntary overtime, and a few other things at the moment, just to control costs. But it was to make sure they could try to keep us on for as long as possible so I think most of us have accepted that as a short-term situation... They have said they've put a stop on voluntary overtime and also not letting you

work extra hours and take it as time in lieu, just as a cost control level and time management measure, but they haven't in my experience, they haven't forced anyone in my department to take unpaid leave or anything.

The question of leave for freelance, contract and casual workers was going to be more pressing than for workers like Alex, who work in historically well unionised workplaces with better enterprise agreements. For Sam, who is a freelance braille transcriber, being able to work depends on access to support workers. And these workers are also mostly casual, contracted through Sam's National Disability Insurance Scheme funding. But during March and April support workers she would ordinarily access became unavailable and this also meant her own ability to work got complicated.

I got a job to transcribe like a tarot deck with a booklet that goes with it and I just, I could not find a reader, no one was willing to come to the house to read. And eventually I did, I got one of our usual support workers that just stepped in and did it, but yeah, I guess the only thing is that a lot of the people from 'Hire Up,' where we get our support workers, I dunno I guess they were scared or were kicking jobs back.

Lily reckoned that their workload increased a lot in March-April in fast food.

... because we're not letting people eat in the restaurant so we're only doing drive through and delivery

and so we've just had stacks and stacks of delivery, literally hundreds everyday it's non-stop. And as well as that because we've had less staff, we've had to do way more work than what we were doing before... even though they've had such huge [covid-19] clusters up in their Sydney stores.

But Lily, like many young people who work in hospitality, felt that the extra work was not acknowledged or adjusted for by management.

The managers, they're not really commenting or acknowledging how much harder we're having to work, they're just being like 'Oh well this is your job, you have to do it' kind of thing. I've had customers comment and stuff coming through the drive through 'Oh there's so many cars and stuff coming through why is it so busy?' I just want to turn around and say 'Well you're here what are you doing here? Why couldn't you have cooked your own food at home?' [laughs]...

### Working from home

The pandemic and economic crisis have seen a revaluation of what is deemed important and valuable, with care increasingly emphasised. The crisis has also provoked a recalibration and reimposition of the discipline of work. Given the logic of cutting costs and salvaging profit, seen in part as companies like Twitter declaring all their staff will work from home permanently, and workspace hire companies like WeWork advertising

like gangbusters, it seems quite likely that many firms are keen to have people work from home or pay for our own workspaces elsewhere. But this is running up against the desires of people who have been collectively demanding less work, and more time with our loved ones.

For those working from home, the distance from physical proximity generated suspicion from management. Grace put it this way,

You're 24-7 sitting in your room doing all this work. And you're not getting any support from your bosses because they think you're slacking off at home... There was this underlying idea that we were abusing the situation to work from home, because some of us had been asking for that for years, and now we'd gotten it.

Here, Grace noticed something that we have also observed. Many people celebrated working from home because it allows them greater flexibility and possibility of determining their own time. But working from home, as has been well documented by now, is really complicated for people for a range of reasons. She continued,

I was trying to say, 'this is a horrible set up, for me, working from home is a nightmare and yet somehow you're still telling me I'm slacking off, when I think that I'm at a massive inconvenience and I wouldn't be doing this if I had the choice.' But I'm doing it because that's what's safest for my roommates, for my colleagues, for my community at the time.

Will aspects of the new pandemic

arrangements stick around? Sabine, a lifelong resident of the Illawarra, reflected,

I think a lot of people have realised that what they were doing is fucked and they don't want to or can't do that anymore. Particularly when it comes to working. It will be interesting to see, when more restrictions get eased, how many people will want to go back to doing the same thing they were doing before. A lot of those people are still working, they are working from home. And if they can do that now, why can't they do that in the future. It must be the same for thousands and thousands of people. Why would you want to travel to work if you didn't have to?

### Seizing the opportunity

Amidst the sackings and assertion that company profit was priority one, resistance emerged. But the reality of the crisis and pressures at workplaces did not translate immediately into coherent perspective and struggle. By May, Tommy and his workmates faced a hard decision – and one that likely resonates with many other workplaces.

The company came to us in the middle of May and said, 'we've lost this much money. And we want... everyone's going to have to take reduced hours and reduce pay, like a whole heap of other different conditions, otherwise, we're going to have to start standing people down and making people redundant.'

The cut they proposed was about \$15,000 a year from the top roster.



And for us, I kind of worked it out to be a bit more actually. And on top of that like reduced hours, and our annual leave was cut into as well, so they used to pay our annual leave at 30 hours now they asked to pay it at 26 hours so four hour loss of annual leave.

This proposal was being made as an interim measure outside of the Enterprise Agreement. Like workers in other beleaguered sectors, such as universities, workers responded by demanding to see evidence of the losses.

They just refused to show us evidence. It was basically like, 'just trust us.'

Workers at the Port did their own calculations and knew that the company had chosen to stop unloading one particular ship, which had resulted in less hours of work for them.

... but they chose to let that smaller ship go because they wanted, they wanted a bigger ship they were going for a bigger ship.

Resistance to taking a pay cut was strong among his workmates, but eventually they voted to accept a deal with management.

*Why do you think some of your workmates supported the cuts?*

Well, a big argument is that everyone's taking a hit, we have to take a hit basically. Covid is a global thing that's affected everyone. You know, we'll get over it. And it's like,

yeah, but our work conditions that we've got on the waterfront, they're not, they're not like, they're not like a result of like luck. There's been a lot of industrial battles, those conditions were won by fighting. We don't just take the loss because everyone else takes the loss... That's not how we've operated in history as a unionized workplace.

If anything, it's up to us to kind of maintain those conditions as much as we can.

Playing out in the conversations at work, Tommy saw two main perspectives on the changes,

So it's kind of just like 'take it, otherwise we're going to get stood down or we're going to get made redundant,' but the thing is those threats aren't just going to go away, because we take these cuts, like we're still yet to negotiate an EBA [Enterprise Bargaining Agreement]. And as if the company's not going to feel bolder in EBA negotiations if we just suddenly keep rolling over now and take these cuts and I guess that's been some of the arguments on the floor...

### **Maccas cuts wages**

In the height of the economic and health crisis, McDonalds cut the wages of some of the lowest paid workers on the continent. This was done with the endorsement of the trade union of those very workers, the Shop Distributors and Allied Employees Association (SDA), Australian Industry

Group (AIG) and the national peak union body, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) which together sought to reduce the fast food award rates. Lily told us about it,

You might have seen the little car convoy that happened in Sydney at the Thornleigh McDonalds. So that was basically about the changes they were making, they wanted to allow the hours for part-time workers to be set at a minimum, allowing them to be basically casuals and as well as that allowing them to cut overtime pay.

For me I'm a casual so I get a 25% loading and so say if I was working at McDonalds and the changes came through, the part time workers that I would be with would immediately get all my shifts because one, I'm too expensive and two, they don't have to roster

me whereas the part time workers they do have to roster. So I would be forced to choose between taking a pay cut to go down to part time work or lose all of my shifts.

I think it's really sad because part-time work, having a roster with set hours and days is just an essential element of part-time work so to take that away, you're just stripping part time workers of their rights completely.

It actually did get passed, what they were proposing, which is pretty disappointing. But the one thing that we can say is that the car convoy that we did, it deterred other workplaces from wanting to go ahead and make the changes as well. I'm lucky that at my restaurant [a different fast food chain] we're under an enterprise agreement so I can't see them changing it...



It's the same shit that was said then that we are starting to hear now. Like the slogan Jobs, jobs, jobs. That's the same fucking slogan as

## [ 2. GETTING ON, KEEPING ON ]

In April, millions of people lost their jobs within the space of a few weeks and the State acted to cushion this blow to the economy. The unemployment payment, JobSeeker, was effectively doubled. A new payment scheme, JobKeeper, was also introduced, which would tie some newly unemployed to their employers for when business was able to start up again. Many casuals were unable to access the JobKeeper payment, while disability and carer pensions stayed the same and temporary visa holders were excluded completely from any payments.

Down from a peak of nearly 15% national unemployment since the beginning of the pandemic, this number is predicted to stabilise around 10%, with under-employment unaccounted for in these figures. Such periods are often accompanied by attempts by bosses and governments to intensify work, drive down wages, and to force people into shittier and more insecure work.

Sabine remembered the last recession in the 1980s,

back in nineteen eighty three. And 'let's get some work schemes.' You know, 'what the unemployed need is training.' Right? It's been very unnerving. Cos it really is like the 1980s. And you think, 'fucking hell, we've been through all this!' Next you'll see the unions start to sell workers down the toilet. You can already see that happening [now]. [They say] 'Oh, it's better to have a job,' you know? 'You might as well start selling your wages and conditions, give them away, cos the main thing is to have a job.'

Everyone knew the increased payments weren't in the interest of everyday people and would certainly be temporary. As young, casual workers, many of Lily's friends had lost work.

Obviously, it's going to be really difficult, especially when the Government tries to roll back the payments back to below poverty level rates. But so many people it seems have had their social position radically thrown out of expectations and so on. So, what it means to be unemployed I think might be a bit

different and the way people think about that maybe? It won't be such a stigmatised situation.

One of Tommy's friends had lost all his paid gigs with his band work and had just applied for the Dole.

He was pretty upset. Yeah, especially like, just going through the whole process. It's such a gruelling process and they just do everything they can to try and make it as hard as possible to get money out of them. Yeah, so I think it's had a big effect.

Sue works with families who depend on social security as well as some families who weren't able to access support payments. In April, she was quite worried about the looming recession.

I'm very concerned about what's going to happen in September when JobKeeper ends and the increase to the JobSeeker ends because the normal unemployment benefit is not enough... There's not a realistic view of how people are going to survive into the future.

In Wollongong, the Illawarra branch of the Australian Unemployed Workers Union has mobilised over the last months, carrying on the tradition of powerful local unemployed workers' organising. Central are demands for welfare for all, regardless of visa status, a raised rate above the poverty line for all, and an end to harassment from Centrelink in the way of basic income management, work-for-the-dole schemes and futile mandatory job searches.

### 'Well, I actually got the coronavirus...'

So, I've got to disclose... I actually got the coronavirus – my parents came back from overseas and obviously I live with them so I couldn't go anywhere else. We followed all the government guidelines and social distancing and all that, they were completely isolated from me in separate parts of the house, we didn't come into contact and I still got it. As soon as they started showing any symptoms I stopped going to work, but at the time it was just this huge thing and the store had to shut... they shut for one night and disinfected everything, and then all of the day staff that were on at the same time as me which was like maybe 6 or 7 people had to quarantine for 10 Days...

I was sort of a bit nervous going back because I was like 'oh no they're gonna know it was me and people are probably gonna hate me' and that kind of thing and think that I've put them at risk but somehow no one figured out it was me and no one disclosed that it was me so that was good. But there was this kind of air of accusation and we were sort of turning against each other like 'Oh, who was sick?' 'Who made me lose 10 days of work?' and that kind of thing.

And then also I think during that week following my positive result because for some reason someone posted about it on Facebook and then the Illawarra Mercury did an article on it, so then all these customers were verbally abusing the workers during the week.



But they were still going there to get food... So, it's like 'oh why don't you just not eat there?' [laughs]... But the hardest thing is that we obviously have to try and social distance ourselves and it's such a small workplace area to be in so you're constantly bumping into each other, trying to work around each other. And also, the other hardest thing is the customers just not respecting our personal space and stuff. We've got these thin plastic barriers in front of the service desk, because we've reopened for people just to come and get takeaway, but people just lean around the side and be fully putting their germs everywhere and that kind of thing...

### '...and the we got two positive cases'

So we initially put some measures in place to deal with covid, because I think the main risk was ships. So our safety committee got together and put in a whole bunch of control measures we had social distancing within the terminal. All our machinery we had to clean every time someone was in it they'd have to clean it before they'd give it over to the next person, or we had like a log of who was in each machine, keeping track of where everyone was. And that went on for about two weeks, I think.

All those things... like the machinery cleaning, social distancing, hand sanitizer and all that, we had to really push the company to get that in.

And then we got two positive cases. And then that kind of impacted all of that again. We got the Chief Medical Officer involved.

This was in early April, while there were Stage 3 restrictions in NSW – commonly called 'the Lockdown.' Tommy remembers this as a really intense time. Given that there were two covid cases at his work on the docks, the workplace safety committee and elected members of the union that deal with safety issues at work decided that they should stop all work until a safety plan was developed.

We kind of fired up a bit and yeah, so we got a few of the measures in... Then we put on this cease work order where the safety committee basically has a right to stop all work over an imminent risk to safety, which they deemed the terminal.

[The bosses said] 'Alright, we've talked to these two people who contracted it, and from talking to them and looking at camera, some cameras around the workplace, these are the people who are deemed at risk of having covid and everyone else, everyone else has to come into work'... Whereas our safety committee said, 'Alright, can we have a look at how you've conducted that analysis?' And um, they just like refused to show how they came to that conclusion.

Much like with the financial situation, the company was unwilling to explain to the workforce how it had come to determine who

had and had not been exposed to the two workers who tested positive for covid-19. This put workers in a hard situation.

Everyone wanted to work and make some money, we just wanted to make sure that the workplace was safe.

We had advice from the Chief Medical Officer and SafeWork. SafeWork came and said we had a legitimate case to stop working. And so, that lasted a week, basically. We didn't work for a week and no one went into the terminal. They shut down the whole terminal.

You were having stories of people catching it off surfaces and stuff, so the company did a huge clean of the terminal, cleaned all the machinery, agreed to all of these all the extra measures and we went back into work the following week.

We got told: a cease work order means you don't come in, you don't come into work. People got rostered to work, and we just, we just rang up the company and said, we're just complying with the cease work order to not come into work.

But [the bosses] saw it as an industrial sort of thing. So they basically stopped paying us and you're not supposed to do that... So, a cease work order, because it's been done through the safety channels, it's meant to be investigated but it's not deemed an industrial matter. Therefore, they can't penalize you for it. But they did, they did anyway... It was pretty unbelievable!

This led to a lot of workers questioning the decision to stop work.

So we went back into work and... everyone felt a lot safer. [But] there was a bit of grumbling because we didn't work and people lost some money over that.

I guess from then, like, we haven't had a new case, the measures have been great. But yeah, I think because like nothing's happened. Like, no one's no one else has been put in danger. It's kind of giving, like, giving a bit of like legitimacy to like, oh, 'why did we even fight it? You know? Like no one's even no one else has got it' and but like in my head the safety committee was just doing what they thought was right and thought they had the power.

But the bosses' vindictive action in withholding everyone's pay has caused fractures among workers.

The worst thing was because we all thought we had a solid safety case. So, that was the most bizarre thing about it – is that we had all these safety laws. We had these people in these high positions, backing our case, saying you've got a legitimate safety case, you've got a legitimate right to stop work. And then the company just said, we just don't agree with your assessment on the situation, therefore, we're just not going to pay you. And like none of those guys [The CMO or the Safety Commission] who backed our safety claim, tried to come in [and back us up]. So they just they just got away with it.

They made like a whole new safety procedure! Like, this huge booklet to deal with covid... so effectively they agreed with all the new controls right? They agreed enough to implement all these controls, yet they still docked us as if we were putting on industrial action!

At the time of writing, it appears that workers who took stop work action while measures were taken to counter transmission risk have still not been paid.

I don't know if you've ever been part of a FairWork case or anything, but, once a company takes money off you it's really, really hard to get it back. So that causes even more controversy within the workplace.

The dock workers had effectively prevented transmission at their workplace. It seems that when prevention is successful, it's easy to take for granted the outcome achieved.

### Pandemic Pay and Sick Leave

In many workplaces, it wasn't clear and it remains unclear whether workers can get sick pay if they have covid-19 symptoms or if they have to take time off work to wait for test results. Casual workers and contractors, as has been well documented by now, have been in a hard position. The expectation that people can and should stay home if they have any covid symptoms, while not being paid, has been as unrealistic as it is cruel. Dianne gave the example of family day care workers who usually run their own business from their homes.

People who do family day care are in a really vulnerable position. If they are ill, who does their work? Where do the children go? I really respect the work that they do and don't envy them the isolation of their role.

After possibly being exposed to the virus, Lily wasn't sure if her workmates got paid at all when they were told to quarantine.

I don't think they would have got paid sick leave or any kind of reimbursement for the time that they would have been off work. But obviously, so many people are out of work at the moment, it's not an uncommon thing...

Healthcare workers, as Lauren told us, had access to special leave if they got sick with covid-19 but that didn't apply to people who had sick leave because they had covid symptoms. Lauren had been on and off sick with covid symptoms for a lot of March and April. Being a health worker, she felt especially concerned about passing anything on to people she works with, and yet she was wanted at work.

I feel kind of screwed either way, like I feel like I let people down but then I also don't want to make people sick. I don't want to risk it... And it's tricky cos we've got people at work who have health issues as well. So I think that creates a bit of anxiety, especially when the clients and their families are people that have health problems and are compromised. So that created anxiety with me, you know, like you're feeling like what do I do?

If one person in a health team gets it that could wipe out the service in that area. So I can see that. But it was like, having a sore throat is only having one little symptom. It's like the risk of it, I don't know, it's not indicative of having something more. I feel like I should be given a choice about it not have it forced on me, maybe. Especially when it's something recurring, like the second time around when I had it again.

She quickly ran out of sick days.

When I got sick again with the sore throat and the doctor then said, my GP was pretty good about it with me, cos I was saying 'look it's the same thing, I'm pretty sure it's not coronavirus, I don't wanna keep going to get tested all the time, I don't know what to do.' She seemed really sensible about things. But the boss didn't seem happy about the idea of me having the two weeks off. Even though at my work there's actually no work for me at the moment. The work that I would be doing it's not there, it's not existent... So it's not like I'm leaving people shorthanded or anything like that. Like it's a good time, in a way, to just try to recuperate from being unwell.

### The Uses of Covid Safety

After the first shocks of the pandemic, Tommy's employer would use some of the hard-won safety measures as chips for enterprise bargaining.

The company said... 'alright, we'll give you hand sanitizer if you sign off on this part of the enterprise agreement'... like, this is our health

and safety! It's not something we're trying to negotiate our work conditions with!

They wanted some clause about superannuation or something else removed, totally unrelated to covid. It was just this really opportunistic grab at trying to get something across the line.

Lily noted how measures to reduce exposure actually meant that her employers could reduce the wage bill.

I think fast food is one of the rare cases during this epidemic that has not lost a lot of revenue just because we can do that contactless delivery and still produce and make money.

The number of staff that have been rostered on don't match the amount of work that there is... If anything, I feel like there's an increase in profits. Especially around Mother's Day we did double what we normally make in a day because of apparently how many people were buying their Mum takeaway...

### Making Safety from Below

The ways that safety measures were rolled out at workplaces varied depending on the workplace and the degree of organisation among workers there. Lily described the circus of how it played out at the fast food chain.

My work put out these new work shirts that have 'Safety, Hygiene Leader' on them and I got one of those and was like 'Great I feel so safe now that I'm the "hygiene leader" apparently' [laughs].

But we did this thing when we're serving, we have to put the drinks (because we serve can drinks) we have to put them in a bag and put them on the counter and have the customer take them away and as soon as the customer leaves we have a dedicated cleaning person who goes out with their gloves and has to disinfect anything that they've touched, like all the eftpos machines and that kind of thing. And also, every hour we have to sanitise everything, have someone go and chuck all this sanitiser on everything...

PPE was in short supply at hospitals and primary healthcare services, and initially, orders from management were that not all staff were to be supplied masks. Lauren was really angry about this.

So you've got health staff who have to expose themselves to face to face contact when they probably don't need to. And we don't have masks or anything. I know that I've seen other colleagues that work in different mental health wards that are complaining about the managers locking up the personal protective equipment in their office. Yeah so, they get to decide when they're allowed to use it or not, and staff are having to see the patients without having that stuff on... Managers, in mental health in particular, they don't give a shit about what the staff want. They won't take recommendations; they just want things to appear to be a certain way.

At the school where Sue works, staff had to really push for basic PPE.

Yeah there were health concerns. Several of our teachers have elderly people that they care for at home. So they've been super, super vigilant. While we've been super vigilant, they've been super, super vigilant knowing that they cannot take any risks home. But yeah, [when] everyone came back [to work at school] we were provided at the eleventh hour with enough paper towels and enough sanitiser for cleaning surfaces and for cleaning hands.

At the Steelworks, they started doing temperature checks and asking a few health questions before every shift.

At work now, when anyone's ill, they are actually accommodating people working from home and a lot of people have been working from home for an extended period now too. Which in some ways has been good to see because it's been kind of going forward we should have more flexibility in our working arrangements too.

One of the other things they did this year they gave us, every employee had access to a free flu vaccination if they wanted. Which I'm just like, I don't understand why we don't do that every year, because you should look after your employees' health.

We got automatic sanitiser dispenser units put in in most of the offices. We keep a pretty large supply of p2 masks and other

essentials on site, so even with the reduced availability we still had a couple more months' worth, so we were in a place where we could keep people safe.

They just got really strict with people going between the office [and various worksites] if they didn't need to, trying to reduce interactions between work crews.

People everywhere self-organised various things to protect themselves as best they could but in some workplaces and institutions managers tried to stop workers from making their own changes. Lauren said,

I have seen one colleague in a different area, I think a friend of hers made some face masks, sewed 'em. I don't know if they're letting them wear 'em or not but that's their solution. Like, if your work isn't gonna provide them, someone's friend made it for them.

Reme was rushing back to her sharehouse in Sydney before the state

border with QLD closed.

... and that was on Friday and the borders need to close on Monday so I bought a flight and I was flying back on [the] Sunday afternoon. It was so hard for me because I couldn't find any mask, I couldn't find gloves, I couldn't find anything for the flight, so I was so scared, I felt like, very... I don't know, like I couldn't protect myself. So I bought kitchen gloves, I put a scarf around my head. I bought like ibuprofen, paracetamol, things like that.

The ways measures to reduce transmission came about weren't always direct. In some cases, as Sue points out, histories of organisation played an important role.

I'm sure the union was putting pressure on the government as well. And I don't think it would have, this is just my personal opinion, but I don't think it would have happened as quickly without union agitating.





out for lunch and might take her to other appointments. She also goes to a day respite centre which is basically to give her carers – me and my partner – a break. She has

## [ 3. CRISES OF CARE/WORK ]

Caring for each other quickly became more complex as considerations of contagion, vulnerability and risk were amplified through the crisis. There have been so many stunning demonstrations of power from below in response to the crisis, and we discuss some in this post. Community responses have gone some way to absorb the intensification of caring and household labour during the pandemic. However, the dominant social organisation of care and the disruption to already inadequate services has largely meant that the highly personal, day-to-day work of caring for each other has fallen more heavily on immediate, generally feminised[1], family members. Sabine talked about how the organisation of care has changed at her place.

I care for my elderly mother and because she is a vulnerable person, because of her age. I had to cancel all the services that we usually have to help her stay with us at home. We usually have people come in from a care provider and they help her shower and also do some housework. She also has a carer that comes once a week and takes her

dementia and she needs pretty much constant care these days. We cancelled all those services when we went into lockdown, because we felt it wasn't safe to have lots of people coming into our home.

Due to business shutdowns and the increasing need to make decisions around care for loved ones, feminised people were more likely to lose their jobs, more likely to scale back their hours, and more likely to leave the labour market altogether. In 2020, government statistics showed that women's formal labour force participation had dropped 10% lower than men's – at 61%. One reading of this would be that feminised folks in particular have prioritised certain non-waged activities at a time of crisis, but we know that the story is more complicated than that.

Feminised people, particularly of bla(c)k, brown and migrant backgrounds, continue to be over-represented in casual, precarious and un-unionised jobs and continue to shoulder the majority of the work of caring for others. Temporary visa

holders (like Reme) and new migrants make up a growing proportion of care workers, reflecting a trend in migration policy to fill low-waged, and now, riskier, less 'covid safe' jobs. New visa arrangements, for example, allow international students to work more hours in aged care facilities as the sector struggles with funding and staffing through the pandemic. A prime example of the way that invaluable work becomes devalued by the racist wage hierarchy imposed through borders.

When we met with Dianne, the announcement had just been made that early childhood educators were to become ineligible from JobKeeper, months before the scheme was to be rolled back in other sectors. That meant that these essential workers in some of the lowest paid work around were likely to be stood down, or pressured to work for less. As a manager at a small centre, Dianne was stressed about the situation.

We have a considerable number of teachers who've had to return to work and who have, from my perception, been fairly stressed about themselves returning to work and the potential for compromising their own health and then taking that back to their families.

The systemic crisis of care is shifted and imposed on the individual as if it is one's own personal dilemma, which obscures its fundamentally social character.

This crisis has illuminated a deep contradiction regarding the politics and work of care. On one hand, for many there has been a widespread re-valuation of care work, valorising its

importance. On the other hand, the crisis is set to continue to deepen the devaluation of feminised labour both in and out of the formal workplace. Caring industries are chronically underfunded and face mounting spending cuts. For example, in July the Government cut the free childcare it had introduced as a crisis measure. At the same time, it is these social services which have been critical throughout this period – community healthcare, childcare, education, aged care, disability care. Throughout this period there has been no increase to carers payments and no loosening of the stringent requirements for getting on a carers payment. So with demand in the home and on the 'frontlines' intensifying, how the burden is carried represents these asymmetries.

This systematic devaluation of care work relates to the devaluation of life deemed unproductive by capital and impacts the lives of carers and those accessing care alike. Working as a tenants' advocate, Grace had met an elderly person who had been delivered an eviction notice during March. As she couldn't access carers during March, she had no support to find another place to live.

She is an elderly woman, so she really couldn't keep going out looking at places anywhere. Her support workers and her carers weren't coming to her house anymore so her reality was 'How do I even get food? I can't go to the shopping centre, my support workers aren't coming to the house anymore and I agreed that I'd be out by this date, if I'm not out by this date, the sheriff can come and kick me out.' But there was just no way to get her anywhere [to live].



Lack of support or contact with others continues to negatively impact peoples' health. As early as April, Sabine noticed that,

Mum has deteriorated quite a lot since we went into lockdown. I think it's because she's not seeing many other people or having any other social interaction apart from the two of us. She has had a couple of visitors in the last few weeks... Her carer came to see her for half an hour or so. And one of her old friends from the neighbourhood, she came to visit as well, so that was good. But, she can't remember those visitors. We were lucky that I had stopped working at the end of last year and was able to step in and replace the cancelled services during lockdown. It is very hard though.

Lauren, a mum and mental healthcare worker, worried about the impacts of isolation and structural neglect.

I don't know about relationships with older people, because a lot of people are trying to stay away from their older relatives to keep them safe. I think that's the thing people are really struggling with, cos they're sort of feeling, people say the cure's worse than the disease or whatever, that not seeing their relatives is upsetting for older people...

Dianne noted an important value shift about how care work is commonly seen.

That notion that it takes a village to raise a child is really important, even if that village can't be together. And I think it has prompted families to rethink what's important. People have been reassessing their values of community, of neighbourhoods, of how it is important not to be just so self-focused that you're not seeing others and their needs. I think there's been a lot of great examples of individuals and communities working to support others and I think that those examples need to be highlighted and nurtured and fostered so that that happens a lot more.

In most capitalist and colonial societies, the household is central to the informal organisation of caring labour. Grace spoke about pulling together and making big decisions in her sharehouse.

It was a hard period. Two of my roommates had completely lost their work. One of them had already been sent home [from work]. For them that was a really scary thing... And there were also those practical discussions: who can afford rent, who can't, how can we manage that, who can afford groceries, who can't, how can we manage that?

Having to look after each other was something we had a lot of conversations about, and we still have to have those conversations today after three months.

## Children and Education

The pandemic has had a profound impact on kids, and their comments can often help us understand what is going on as well. As Sam relayed, discussing the disruption to life with her grandkids could be hard. Even before the lockdown had begun, Sam's family were taking measures of precaution which the children quickly understood in their own terms.

Before it kind of got to official lockdown we sort of started to say to Riley because Paige has a heart condition anyway, one of her lungs is too small because the arteries and stuff are narrowing between her lungs, and um, and we'd started to say, maybe you shouldn't be catching buses and ease all that off a little bit. So when she'd come to visit she'd put them both in a little mask and they were calling it 'the sick', it was really hard for them to understand why they can't play at the playground and stuff. And Riley would say 'it's because the sick is everywhere, and other people might have it but you can't see it' and trying to explain this to a 3 and a half year old... It's really hard to explain, like that was another thing, we'd get calls from Paige and Mia who are 3 and a half and 2 and a half and they'd be like 'oh can we come over your house Nanny?' and we were like 'Aah... No...' and it was just hard to explain 'Oh that 'sick' is still here. We can't see you because [of the sick].

For high schoolers the impact was felt strongly as well. When asked how the lockdowns and move to online schooling had affected her kids, Lauren said,

Yeah, yeah it's been a huge change. So, not much for Simon, Simon is 19, but for Ella, so that change with not going to school, I think that's been a really big change. Like, even just with sleep, that's become a big... and even like personal hygiene is really bad, like she comes in today and she's like 'Oh, you know I think I'm getting things back together, I brushed my hair yesterday.' I'm like 'Fuckin' hell!' Cos the day before I looked at it and I was like 'Man, you've got a massive knot in your hair!' But she's just sleeping all day, it's a real struggle to get that motivation to do schoolwork when you don't have that structure, and I think missing their friends a lot. So, it's surprising to know that like a lot of the kids... in fact the kids are at work as well, they were actually keen to get back to school. That's probably a bit of a surprise. They're struggling a bit I think.

Sam's kids had a similar experience with struggling with school.

Yeah, Taylor still lives at home, I guess it's probably affected her the worst because she's doing her HSC or ATAR, so yeah so she's been doing the online learning which she's been coping... for some reason their school decided they weren't going to do anything face to face so it was just like having weeks and weeks of homework. There was no online classroom interaction, I think she found that really hard.

The broader networks and institutions of social reproduction, including workers in child care centres and schools, have played a crucial role in creating care and education as well,



while also mitigating the negative impacts of the lockdown process. Dianne commented on how central these networks were during the early stages of the pandemic, especially as workplace closures and work from home arrangements were put in place.

Right at the beginning when schools were expecting families to maintain the home learning, I had quite a number of families who were really stressed over that. And it was really important to say stop getting into a battle with your child over that because they're not ticking the boxes the school has expected is not in the best interests of anyone. It's not going to contribute to their learning and rethink how you have your time. Make the learning experience fun and caring and part of the family time. Do it through cooking, gardening, do it through real activities. If it's a stressor stop it. If it's a stressor, transform it into something else, into another way of learning. Like, one Mum was in tears because of the battles she was having with her son to try and get him to do the set tasks from the school. I think there's been a lot of stressors for families. A lot of families are worrying about the impact on their child's education from this.

All children's education will be different in 2020. We just hope it hasn't been pressured and that it can be a positive thing that's happened because of this complete atypical year. As opposed to making it detrimental. It hopefully will have made schools, teachers and families

re-evaluate what is valuable, what is important and what children need.

The practice of re-assessing what is valuable is crucial and recurring. This came up as Sue, a teacher, spoke to the practices of care she and her co-workers brought to the school environment, often stretching beyond the limits or resources of the institution to teach directly about the pandemic.

[We are] always mindful of the health of our students. So we were mindful of them and making sure that they were aware of the importance of hand washing. And I remember on the last day of school before the total lock down, I took my class downstairs and I brought a cake of soap from home for every one of my students and I took them down and we actually washed our hands at the trough so they could gauge what 20 seconds of handwashing was – which is actually quite a long time. And the importance of drying with a towel. So yeah that's what we did. You had to bring your own soap in!

Other challenges arose with the quick shift to online teaching and learning.

We quickly assembled lots of paper materials to send home with them. I think the information came through to us on maybe late Thursday afternoon and Monday was the last day of school. So that whole day was spent preparing them with materials across all their KLA subjects, and quickly making sure that they could all access their

emails and that they all had devices. Because a lot of our students don't have devices, probably the majority of them didn't have devices, so we were able to lend them devices. But we had to make sure they could all access their emails, but of course there really wasn't enough time.

With the shift to online learning, the issues of time and existing forms of social disadvantage were also a key consideration for Sue and her co-workers.

So during the first couple of weeks we spent a lot of time on the phone doing one on one conversations helping them to access their email... Most of us where I work every day we'd be on the phone. Sometimes the one on one lessons would be for thirty minutes... sometimes they'd be for 5 minutes if the student was going well with their work. But it was a time where students who already had some degree of self-regulation and motivation, they thrived, even though they found it difficult and they missed their friends, missed the socialisation. But many of them surprised us with their ability to maintain a schedule. And we decided we'd encourage them to do the work from 8:30, which is when school normally starts, until about 1. And that was enough... That really did equate anyway to the number of face to face hours you would do. But there were many students who, for whatever reason, weren't able to develop that self-regulation because some of them have parents or carers who are trying to manage jobs as well.

As a result, the challenges and realities of online learning reflect class divisions

that already characterise society. Again, Sue reflected,

We were able to, we did make sure that every family did have access to the internet even if it was through their phone. But the scenarios in our families never matched up to the scenarios that you would see every week in the SMH of these students who were generally from the north shore and very well equipped with devices. And they were managing beautifully, and they were enjoying their home learning. So, you know the reality out there for many families was totally different. It wasn't as rosy; it wasn't as accessible. They had to face many hurdles.

### Mutual Aid and Disaster Communism

Disasters have the potential to highlight the acts of care and solidarity which are foundational to most of our daily lives. These instances of everyday communism come into focus and expand in their significance in the face of disaster.

From the earliest days of the pandemic, local networks mobilised in support of each other. As in most crises, people on the ground were best positioned to know and communicate their own needs, and act faster than the state could (or would) to make sure whatever resources the community had were shared around. Beyond rising to the occasion, there was a sense of joy in being able to be engaged in the meaningful work of caring for one another as we heard stories of the disaster communism that flourished.

Sabine spoke about mutual aid efforts where she lives.

There's a restaurant we have been to a couple of times that's relatively new... It's run by these two nice young blokes and I saw on Facebook that they were giving out free food to people one afternoon... I thought that was a very nice thing to do and that I would like to help them out too. I spoke to them on the phone. And he was like 'oh nah, we don't need it' and I'm like, 'look just buy some more food' and he said 'oh we had all this food in the cool room and instead of throwing it away we might as well cook it and give it away to people doing it tough.' This was before the Government brought in the JobSeeker double dole and JobKeeper payments. Anyway, I took them some money so they could keep up the great work. They were very appreciative. I heard them interviewed on the radio about their generosity and they mentioned a nice lady who gave them some money, that was me! [laughs]

Using local shops to dispatch and coordinate resources played an important part in the response.

There were a few places in Fairy Meadow, where we live, that were giving out food. We have a petrol station at the top of our street. For decades it has been young Indian people, usually uni students, who work there. They put a call out saying the servo was a collection point for food and goods for international students who

weren't getting any help from the Government. We took a box of food up for them.

Online mutual aid networks helped direct resources to where they were needed and provided a sense of togetherness. Grace said,

I think that one thing that's surprised me, and it shouldn't have come as a surprise, but I was happily surprised about how much everyone came together and looked after each other. In Wollongong, there was the Gong Mutual Aid Group [on Facebook]. Whether it was advice or debriefing stuff out loud, that was a massive source of support and comfort to know that you're not the only one who's having these thoughts and anxieties. And that there are people out there who can help you, and not on a weird hotline out there, but people here in your community.

But also, just the little shit, the fact that my neighbours were all walking around and checking on each other. Now, after this crisis passes, those relationships have been strengthened throughout all of this. I think that has been really nice.

Factoring in risk, vulnerability and capacity were part of the mutual aid effort.

I was doing a whole bunch more care work for people in my community. My older neighbours, I was out doing grocery trips for friends, I was doing 4 or 5 people's groceries at once. Part of the reason I was doing that was because I was

still going to the office, so I figured I may as well also be taking the risk of going to the grocery shop, for others who can't take that risk. I'm lucky, I don't have a lot of the other vulnerability factors that others have.

Some networks of care exist informally within formal structures. Sue, working at a school in a poorer area, referred back to the important support being offered outside of formal work roles.

There was one family I know of where both parents ended up not working, so we were just using our contacts with outside agencies to inform them of where they could get subsidies or boosts to their income. So we had to be aware of that. We were trying to be on the lookout for families who would be affected by job losses and would not qualify for the JobSeeker. Few of our families would qualify for the JobKeeper allowance because they haven't been in a job for that long.

While the state was shutting residents of aged-care facilities away, teachers, the elderly and children together came up with creative ways to stay connected, knowing the importance of maintaining these relationships. Diane said,

A lot of preschools have had strong relationships with aged care facilities and have had to rethink that connection. So a friend of mine, at her centre they have elder friends and in walking distance is an aged care facility and they go up each week and spend time and play with the elderly residents and because of this that's had to stop. So, it sort of prompted more letter writing, sharing paintings... Others have moved on to Zoom and having Zoom conferences between early learning settings and aged care settings so there have been some changes in that way.

## The Ruby Princess

On April 5, the Ruby Princess cruise ship moored at Port Kembla with around 1000 crew members being held on board. At this point, 200 were displaying flu-like symptoms and 18 had tested positive for covid-19. With passengers having been allowed to disembark, hundreds of whom had later tested positive for coronavirus, the death toll of related cases was rising both on and off the ship. In a show of extreme negligence by the state, Border Force and private contractor Aspen Medical held the crew on board without adequate medical care or access to basic goods. Sabine recalled,

The Mission to Seamen in Port Kembla put a call out for community members to donate items to the crew, [as] 'there were hundreds, maybe thousands locked in their cabins on the ship.' We took a box down for them. They were inundated with donations. The mission made up little care packages for each crew member. I had put in colouring books and pencils, novels and umm, what else? Ohhh, just all sorts, I couldn't go out and buy anything, I just had to find stuff around the house to include, things that might give people something to do. I did shove some biscuits in the box as well. The people of the Illawarra, as usual, were very generous and thousands of care packages were loaded onto the ship.

Despite having collected so much to donate, Sabine remembered being blocked from delivering the goods, and agitating in solidarity with the crew.

The police were all over the dock, they weren't letting anyone on or near the ship. The local unions took up the cause of the crew and

liaised with the police and security. Eventually union reps were allowed onto the ship to talk with the crew about their needs.

They didn't stop there...

Through the agitating of the local unions and Illawarra residents, the crew began getting tested for COVID-19 and treated. Eventually most of the crew were able to fly home. The ship left Port Kembla with a great send off, with a skeleton crew on board.

These acts of solidarity were returned by the crew.

The crew were so impressed with the help they received from the Illawarra that they put a big banner on the back of the ship as they were leaving. I want to know where they got it from, cos that [banner] was MASSIVE! And they donated – the crew actually donated out of their own wages – thousands of dollars to the homeless hub in town... They were so thankful for what the people of the Illawarra had done for them.

### [Endnotes]

1. People who are gendered feminine by society and/or themselves, and for whom this gendering influences the paths and conditions of their lives. We favour this phrase to speak to the social and political process of gendering, and include trans and gender diverse folks for whom this process is relevant, but whose identity may be something other than woman.







# BORDERLINES

When the outbreaks began in so-called Australia, Reme was working in hospitality in a tourist area of Queensland to meet her working holiday visa requirements. Within days she had lost her job and was on a plane back to NSW, unsure how this might impact her visa situation.

I've been in Australia for 2 years and a half now, and this is my second year working holiday visa holder. And when coronavirus started getting bad, I was in Queensland doing the [visa] extension, so

## [ 4. BORDERLINES ]

The Federal Budget announced in October displayed the ideological character of the pandemic response, with cuts to the overall number of visas to be granted and the imposition of English language requirements for partners. The Federal Government has used its 2020-21 Budget to cut Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Program by 5000 places a year and halve its financial assistance program to people seeking asylum while increasing funding to its punitive offshore processing regime. Since March, non-citizen non-residents cannot enter the country, the Government is advising people to reconsider the need to apply for Australian visas, and people with Australian citizenship are banned from leaving, with even dual citizens requiring special permission to leave the country. Migration, which accounts for 60% of Australia's population growth, is now almost at zero.

that meant that I had to be there working in hospitality or farm work or things like this for 88 days. So, I couldn't complete all the days because of coronavirus, and the restaurant where I was working, they closed, they shut down... they didn't want to fire us, but they had to do it because, it's like... we couldn't work.

Like many visa holders, Reme wasn't sure whether to return home or whether she'd be able to return to Australia if she did.

My Mum and my dad were like 'please don't come back to Spain, it's not time. Try to get the visa and stay longer.' Because to go back to Spain you need to stop [in either] Doha, [or] Dubai, you need to stop somewhere. They were like 'please, I'm praying so bad, we really want

the Government to give to you the visa approval.' Because otherwise I have to leave Australia.

It wasn't the right moment... because I need one more year for work to apply for the PR [Permanent Residency]. So, that was also my concern, like I don't know if I'm gonna get the visa, I don't know if I have to come back to Spain, I don't know if I can keep working.

In Australia, national borders were pretty much closed by April when we were doing this research. Some temporary residents in Australia were able to go home. Others like Reme were stuck in very uncertain conditions, with casual workers being laid off in the hundreds of thousands and temporary visa holders not being eligible for any economic welfare. This coincided with a public discussion about who was an 'essential' worker. For decades the economy has been restructured on the basis of jobs with such poor conditions that few who have access to citizenship are willing to accept – essential work like producing food, caring for children, disability and aged care, building, cleaning, and consuming services like education at Australian universities. Without people on temporary visas the economy (as it is) could not function.

In May, the ALP's shadow immigration Minister came out saying that Australia needs to cut its migrant intake to 'protect aussie jobs.' This classic national protectionist crap runs deep in a history of the labour movement in Australia – ignoring the fact that it is not migrants who 'steal' jobs, but casualisation, attacks on workers' self-organisation through labour laws and competition along the supply chain. As has been made crystal clear in the

present crisis of Australian universities, the chronic underfunding of public education and the consequent development of a competitive business model intent on squeezing every last penny from anyone who can pay it has meant that without international students university bosses reckon these institutions can no longer function.

While questions around work, income and visa status were uncertain, Reme had to give up her apartment in Sydney and return to the Illawarra to stay with a family she had previously worked for. After refusing to offer a rent reduction, Reme's real estate agency seized their bond and racially abused Reme and her flatmates.

[With] my apartment, we decided just to leave it because to keep paying, we didn't have job. [My flatmates] are both students. My friend, she is from Argentina, and the guy is from Barcelona... They both are holding student visas at the moment. Well they couldn't attend the academy, they had to study from home.

And we also lost the bond. We paid at the beginning \$1250 each and we lost everything. So, it was like a penalty to leave...

Also, the agency was so impolite to us like 'we don't care if you cannot pay, it's your problem, it's not mine. So before to come here and be complaining, learn English, and we don't want to talk to you no more.' It was so hard... Also, we had to rent a garage to put all the furniture because we didn't have any place to leave all this stuff. And it was like, everything, like fridge, washing machine, beds, couch, everything!

So, we are still paying this garage. Now it's \$200 because it's come back to normal [prices] but before it was just \$50 per each.

Many of Reme's friends, also on working or student visas, also found themselves out of work and struggling to pay rent with no income and no access to welfare. Reme spoke about her friends and co-workers,

They've been living hard. Like sleeping two people in a single bed, things like that. Eating bad because you don't want to spend money, eating no veggies, no fruit. So bad conditions, just because you want to stay in Australia, just because you think you can find a good future being here. Whatever the reason is.

Consumer stimulus payments and increases to social security payments announced in March excluded temporary visa holders. As masses of people found themselves stuck in Australia and needing to extend or renew their visas, the Federal Government promptly exploited the situation by introducing new visa fees. Being a temporary resident, Reme felt this acutely.

So, there were a lot of people that were like 'I cannot leave the country because if I leave the country to apply for the visa I cannot come back.' The Government, they say 'OK, you can apply inside but you have to pay extra money.' So even... tourist visa [used to be] free and now is like \$700 even \$1000 just because you are applying in Australia.

Yeah, we got a group in Facebook, like all Latins and Spanish speakers, and everybody was complaining, like, how can I pay? It's even more expensive to apply for a tourist visa than working holiday visa. How can that be when tourist visa has been always for free and now it's like \$700 or a thousand dollars?

Reme and her friends had a strong feeling that this was a strategy to push them to leave the country.

Because it was like the Government... couldn't afford all the foreign people that there are in Australia. It's like Australia is a big country but there's not too many people living in. So, a big amount of people, we are foreign. They don't want to lose us, but they don't want to keep us here just paying us without... if we are not working.

While facing pressure to 'go home,' those who remained also faced new and increasing racism within the community, landlords and employers. Reme said,

I got a friend of mine, he moved to Queensland to do the farm work. It wasn't even farm work for the visa, it was just to find a job. And they were like 'Well you are Spanish, we don't want Spanish people because of the virus.'

*Oh my god!*

Yeah. So, he was like, 'I cannot understand, I'm living in Australia, I didn't even come back to Spain.' And apparently there were a lot of people who were trying to find

a job in farms and they couldn't just because they were Latins or European and it's been so bad, the virus in Europe and also America. The farms say no to them. Like 'no, no, no, because you're gonna bring the virus and we don't want that.' It's racist.

Throughout the pandemic, racism and xenophobia have been a form of social policing that attempts to subjugate groups of people to low-paid, precarious and hyper-exploitative conditions. This has, of course, been met with resistance. Wollongong, being a university town and a cheaper alternative to the major cities, is home to many international students. The town has over a century of strong struggles from migrant communities, particularly around labour struggles associated with the Steelworks, port and mines. When the Ruby Princess was docked in Port Kembla, the strength of these networks quickly mobilised to change the message from the xenophobic hysteria of the corporate media's 'foreigners bring disease' to 'healthcare for everyone.' The local newspapers were forced to change their headlines, with the outpouring of care and support for the workers trapped on the Ruby Princess drowning out the Government's attempt to silence and isolate the cruise ship's staff. Countless shops and restaurants in the 'Gong over this time gave (and continue to give) out free food to international students and others who found themselves in the limbo of the many borderlines being carved around and over them. Reme continued,

Yeah because the Prime Minister said first are Australian citizens, and if he got time, and still money, he will help us. It was like, hard time.

Because I feel very blessed and grateful, because, as I told you I got the family here and they have been supporting me all the time. But there are people, they are foreign, and they couldn't handle to keep paying rent, keep paying everything. And the schools as well, because when you are a student the academy is like, 'well you are here so you need to keep paying.'

At the beginning their parents were sending money to them because it was hard. And like, trying to live as much people as possible in the same places, like sharing the bills.

Unable to access support, many visa holders were forced into crowded living conditions making them more vulnerable to the virus.

Yeah... I guess like Bondi, Coogee, Maroubra, all this area is like a lot of South American, like Latin people, and also Spanish, European. So that's why they say 'foreign people, they got the virus' but it wasn't just because [of being from somewhere else].

All of them trying to save money as much as possible. It was uncertain times, we didn't know how long it would take, like the virus, so looking in the future it's like I need to save as much as possible just in case it's gonna take like 3 months, 4 months... I need to be ready to afford these payments. So, it was very hard.



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Wollongong, a city of only 305,000 inhabitants, hasn't been the centre of an outbreak and hasn't experienced the severity of mandatory orders in the ways that other places have. Back in April when we were asking people how they had experienced policing during the first months of the pandemic, it wasn't surprising to us that direct encounters with police in Wollongong had been relatively few. For example, Sam recalled that some local teenagers had 'kept being given the same fine, and yet other people are absolutely not social distancing and completely

got away with it.' Other people appeared to have internalised the threat of surveillance and punishment, expressing concerns about attending the Black Lives Matter rallies or feeling that they were hearing more sirens around at night and seeing more cop cars on the streets. True or not, of the ten people we spoke to, none had been stopped by police and few had heard of fines being used back in April. We were told however, about how police were deployed to enforce home quarantine of returned travellers and people who had become infected with covid-19.

We got visited by the police a couple of times to make sure we were doing our quarantine. They came to the door and were chatting to my stepdad and were like 'is there anything we can do for you?' I was standing there in the background and was just like 'fuck you.' My stepdad was like 'oh can you get us some toilet-paper?' and they were like 'no.' And I'm thinking 'what are you actually going to do to help us?'

This was one respondent's visceral response to police involvement in managing the public health crisis. She knew that they weren't there to help or make her family's experience of the virus easier. While some considered the threat of punishment necessary to increase compliance and flatten the curve, others were concerned about crisis policing. What would the cops do with their new powers, emboldened by the emergency?

Writing now in October, we can see that peoples' fears were not without basis. Policing has particularly targeted newer migrant communities and social housing residents. As early as April we saw reports of disproportionate use of fines in western Sydney despite the

main covid hotspots being the wealthy, white-dominated eastern suburbs at that time. There have been remarkable cases of punitive use of fines, particularly targeting young people. In April, three Wollongong teens were fined \$1000 each when they didn't have an excuse to be outside.

The Australian Defence Force were brought in to help address the bushfires, and have again been deployed for the coronavirus response. Increasing the defence force presence in domestic emergencies is militarising our day to day lives. In the current context, the military is getting a boost in income, meanwhile fire and health services are cut.

Public protest gatherings essentially stopped for a while, only gradually resuming with caution. Police were quick to use the Public Health Act to prohibit protests, particularly protests against the carceral state and for justice for Aboriginal and Black communities. A Wollongong Black Lives Matter protest in June was deemed unlawful, but people showed up and defied the police. At the time of writing, the suppression of protest is ongoing.







issues because it was just like, I've had 30 people who've called me today facing eviction, and we've never seen this surge of people calling us...

We were seeing all the other kinds of terminations. We were seeing no-grounds notices, we were seeing the 'end of fixed terms,' we were seeing the 'sale of premises'...

I think some agents definitely were encouraging landlords to get out,

## [ 5. RENT STRIKE! ]

The pandemic put the concept of a rent strike on the table for the first time since the post-war Depression. On March 23, changes to the Residential Tenancies Act had come into effect and then on top of these the Federal Government was hinting at a moratorium on evictions. No one really knew what to expect.

In mid-April, the Federal Government announced a 60-day stop on landlords seeking evictions for rental arrears where the renting household has been financially impacted by covid-19, which was later extended to 6 months. This didn't prevent other manifestations of housing stress and insecurity. Grace, from the local tenants' advocacy service, saw this playing out.

My job at that stage was like just such an immediate putting out the fires as they come. I had no way to think about the larger structural

to try and just get people out of the tenancies before any possible moratorium came into effect.

So what we were stuck with were actually a lot of tenants with no-grounds notices, who we knew legally that they were gonna have to get out, we knew legally that the tribunal was gonna terminate them, but the problem at that point was open houses were closed, real estate agents were closed. So we had a bunch of people who knew that their eviction was looming but they just couldn't find another property. They could be the best tenant in the world and have a great rental history but there just weren't any properties on the market. And this was made worse by the fact we've just come out of a massive bushfire season and so we were already facing the fact that a huge amount of housing was just gone!

The so-called moratorium on evictions, from our perspective, was about keeping tenancies stable for the servicing of mortgage debt. From the State's perspective, the greatest concern has been to ensure that loans would continue to be repaid. This meant stopping tenants in financial hardship from breaking leases by dangling a weak promise of respite from paying rent. Grace's comments on the tune many landlords sung back in April exposed the asymmetries of the housing market in major cities and regional towns across Australia.

I also do think that there were a lot of landlords who trump up their financial hardship. There was a lot of 'I'm not gonna be able to make my mortgage repayments.' And I was like 'How did you not have a contingency plan for if a tenant didn't pay their rent for a couple of weeks?' Because in reality, that's what it is.

Grace described co-occurring things. For sure, landlords as a social category are interested in making as much money as they can from rent. But the increased dependence of a large portion of society on housing asset inflation drives this. For over two decades in Australia, property ownership has been crafted by successive governments as the source of welfare for about a third outright, and another third who have mortgages. Meanwhile, the State has frozen or cut social security and incentivised households to take on more and more debt to access a level of comfort or promised future consumption.

In a move to encourage people to keep borrowing, back in early March the Reserve Bank of Australia cut interest

rates to a new record low of 0.5 per cent. In September 2020, the Federal Government moved to relax lending restrictions, in an attempt to use debt as an immediate form of welfare while the government winds back a range of social security measures introduced in the earlier months of the year.

### A moratorium on evictions?

We saw a lot of agents presenting themselves to tenants as if they knew what was going on, they knew what the moratorium was gonna look like, telling landlords they knew what it was gonna look like when in reality, no one knew at the start of it. There was a huge period of time when no one knew whether there was gonna be a moratorium. No one knew the details.

And yet you had agents telling tenants 'there will definitely not be any moratorium!' Or they were telling tenants 'there is a moratorium but it doesn't absolve you from paying rent and you have to continue paying your full rent otherwise we will evict you for that.'

If you hear your real estate agent telling you there's definitely not gonna be a moratorium, a lot of tenants just took that for face value or we saw the problem of real estate agents giving financial advice, telling tenants, 'you're gonna have to keep paying your rent, so you should draw on your super.'

Grace explained how vague the actual terms of the Moratorium were when it was announced, from what it meant to be eligible, to the fact that good faith negotiations effectively meant nothing.



[The advocates would say] 'Ok, so you fit the bill as an impacted tenant' and [the tenants would] be like 'what does that mean' and we'd be like 'well, not much, you're still not entitled to a rent reduction, we still can't force the landlord to give you a rent reduction or any kind of reprieve, but there is an expectation in the law that they have to have good faith negotiations.' The tenants would be like 'well what does that mean?' and I'd be like 'it means that when you offer to pay 50% of the rent, they have to consider it before they say no. And that's it. We can't force them to say yes, we don't really know what good faith negotiations means, I think it just means that they don't swear at you when they say no.'

### Pay back

While the moratorium temporarily removed one stressor, it didn't make unpaid rent go away. Tenants were expected to pay it all back. Reme's real estate agent was uncompromising.

If you play less, at the end like once you start working you have to pay what you didn't pay... Yeah, so it would be a big period like paying a big amount, like even if you have work, job, or whatever you are doing, it's so hard, so we decided just to leave the lease and start by nothing. So at least stop paying, and that's it. Start by nothing again.

Grace had witnessed a range of responses from tenants in the Illawarra, with some contacting the Tenants Advocacy service early for advice, while

others negotiated directly with their real estate agents and landlords.

Some people... thought 'Yes I'm in trouble but I've spoken to my real estate agent, I've spoken to my landlord and they're just telling me everything's gonna be fine, it's gonna be alright.' And then it was only later on, cos some real estate agents were like 'Just pay whatever you can the landlord's not gonna issue you with a notice of termination don't worry about it.' And so they did that and after a couple of weeks the landlords were like 'Oh now you have to repay us. When we said "pay what you can," we just meant that the landlord won't issue you a notice of termination right now. But there was always this unspoken expectation that of course you were going to pay it back and if you don't pay it back we're gonna kick you out right now.'

### Moving during a pandemic

People who weren't eligible for social security, like Reme, found it really hard at the beginning of the outbreak here.

I really know they've been living hard [other friends on temporary visas]. Like sleeping two people in a single bed, things like that. Eating bad because you don't want to spend money, eating no veggies, no fruit. Bad conditions, just because you want to stay in Australia, just because you think you can find a good future being here. Whatever the reason is.

*It's tough because the people who can't access any support from the Government for losing their jobs, then end up living in really cramped conditions, which is not great for spreading the virus.*

While moving house was a permitted activity under the public health order, it was still costly, anxiety-inducing and practically fraught for many. Grace said,

I think the biggest difficulty in Wollongong was like, people just wanted to stay put, they just didn't want to be moving and changing and getting out on the roads...

Grace was supporting an elderly tenant through an eviction process at the time. She recalled that,

Her family couldn't help her move because she was too high risk to be exposed. So for her the problem was, 'I can't hire contractors, I can't hire movers because I'm so scared of exposure to movers, I can't get my family members to come and help me...' She was this little old woman who was trying to move her house by herself and that was really difficult.





**"it's like every  
day is the fucking  
same..."**

## [ 6. A STRANGE PRESENT ]

What punctuates time? For many, covid time became related to domestic productivity. For Sabine, being at home and not being able to leave gave her time to 'catch up' on jobs that 'should have already been done' in 'normal time.' It is as if covid was a bubble in time, or a time bonus.

It was actually good to be able to catch up on the jobs I had to do around the place. Got in the garden, repotted all the plants. Cleaned out cupboards, all that kind of stuff.

For others it wasn't like that. Lauren described an anxious tension about 'not wasting' the time at home, which had become available from an interrupted relationship to her workplace.

I don't know, probably, it's been, I don't know... I always feel anxious

about wasting time. I always feel like you've got to be productive, you've got to be reading or doing things. I think I've been doing a lot of watching trashy TV, not even trashy, just watching TV or watching movies which is unusual for me... so, not doing stuff. Like, in a way, it kind of makes time go, I don't know, it just feels like some sort of vortex, that's not fast or slow... But interesting that feeling of pressure, like having to be purposeful.

TV and news became an obsessive meter of time for many of us. For example, Sam said,

I think [time] dragged a bit, say, for the first 4 or so weeks... I also mean, this isn't a time thing, but I used to obsessively jump online and watch all the corona... because you can only take so much of that.

*Yeah, watching the news...*

Yeah and just all the facebook and everything was 'corona this [and corona that]' and I was like 'ok, we all know it's here.' I guess that was my coping mechanism, I'd literally sit here and be like 'oh there's another 2 cases in the Illawarra blah blah.'

As the pandemic has drawn on, memories of time - its shapes and flow - began to form, or be noticeably blurry. Grace reflected on something she had found particularly strange.

One thing that's weird talking about this now, the last 3 months have totally just blown into 1 for me. I'm like 'I can hardly remember what I did a week ago let alone...' Yeah thinking back to what was happening in March and April, it feels like it was ten years ago I can't even remember what we were doing other than just trying to keep afloat really.

Sabine was finding it hard to remember things.

It's like everyday is the fucking same as the one before. You can't really tell what day it is. But they still seem to go fairly quickly....

### **Resisting the gloom!**

I think people realised pretty early on that you couldn't listen all day every day to the covid reports on tv or radio because it was bad for your mental health.

That was Sue, narrating the foreboding gloom that many of us have felt this year. She continued,

But at the same time you tend to feel that you're living in some futuristic, dystopian society that's been written about in novels. You think 'oh here it is.'

We watch the numbers rise and fall, and rise again, and fall again, asking ourselves what's in these numbers, what do they mean? How are they made? What meaning is made from them? There's so much not expressed in the daily counts, and Sue highlighted some other consequences.

Another consequence of this virus is that people's health has been affected by not being able to access healthcare they would ordinarily have had, or surgeries they were scheduled to have. And I know that people who would normally go to the doctor for various consultations haven't gone because of fear of picking up the virus in the surgery. So it is a different way of thinking but I've not sensed a fear, a great fear. There are individuals who are fearful, even in my workplace, but they're a minority.

Talking about her workmates and friends, most of whom work in hospitality, Reme said that it was really hard for people to 'shut down and do nothing.' Because as she saw it, people around her are so adjusted to working all the time.

Like go to the opposite extreme, like nothing, nothing to do. All the time at home. Like getting bored, overthinking all the time. Which is like, one of the things about



coronavirus is mental health, it's been like attacking so bad to the people who used to work everyday, being so busy and then to do a lot of stuff and then do nothing.

Lauren was very concerned about the looming mental health impacts of isolation combined with rising unemployment and the general feeling of things getting more shit for everyone.

I think there's going to be a mental health crisis after this, that will be a huge thing, I think. I guess there's the potential for relationships to get stronger, but when we try and get people back out of the house I think that when we're going to have issues, on the other end.

Certainly people that have got any sort of social anxiety they've been allowed to stay home for this 6-18 months, that's not gonna be great, they're gonna be pretty entrenched and unwell by the time this is over. That's gonna be a big problem I think. And depression, even for people that weren't depressed before I think we might see that people with that inclination will probably have that.

Sam was feeling depressed for weeks as the outbreak worsened around us, but she felt that after a while she began putting energy into new projects, particularly her garden.

Probably for the first say 4 or 5 weeks I was just majorly depressed and had no motivation to do anything, apart from drink alcohol [laughs]. And then sort of, well sort

of towards the end of it because I guess we're almost back to normal which, is a bit debatable but, I started to take much more interest in the garden and I think that's what made me get more motivated because, just knowing that we really should get this thing up and running, because this pandemic stuff, like it's gonna keep happening and we need to be a lot more self-reliant.

Despite the fear, grief and uncertainty around the impacts of coronavirus, a clear sense of hope and possibility were part of the rupture. Changes were happening at mass scale, very fast. The impossible became possible - all of a sudden, we saw examples of resources being produced and distributed based on need rather than market directives. We saw the state quickly funnel billions more dollars into welfare services and intervene in private manufacturing to increase the production of masks, sanitiser and other items deemed to stop the spread of covid at the time. This showed that there is no lack of capacity to organise society in different ways. Cracks were opening and within them was the space to imagine vastly different worlds.

Alongside fears of grave change for the worse, with the virus and many of its countermeasures immediately amplifying preexisting lines of exploitation and oppression, were imaginings of liberatory re-organisations of society - of rupture from below.

Working at the Steelworks and thinking a lot about what a just transition could look like, Alex said,

I think we're standing in a moment of time where we can change the way the world works. Like we've proven so many of the structures that society is built on don't really matter, and so many of the things that the government considers non-essential are essential.

Lauren said,

There has been this sense of how quickly everything can change. Cos there's often that sense of, um, depression I guess about how entrenched all this bad shit is and how nothing can get better, but then how quickly everything's changed just from something that you could never expect. And in some ways, that's been hopeful, just that everything, the whole world can freaking change... just from one thing.

And Alex thought that priorities could change too.

I mean like, they've been putting homeless people in housing and shelter... This is the first time they've been given a chance in decades... There's no reason anyone in this country should be homeless. You know, the fact that they raised rate, and the fact that they just scrapped all this stupid nonsense around all these different [welfare payments] and just went, you know what, JobSeeker, and increased it so that it was a liveable amount of money for people.

These measures saw some of us through the initial shock of covid-19, and have allowed us to see how quickly we might re-organise the distribution of resources, but under the rule of profit

it was unlikely they would last. The first significant cuts to welfare happened in September, with the recently announced government budget indicating many more to follow.

### Meanwhile...

I think the climate crisis has really taken a backseat to the pandemic. I haven't felt that motivated to do a great deal anyway... And god knows what's been happening, while everyone's been focusing on this pandemic, what the fuck has been happening to the environment? They've been sneaking in permission to mine here, there and everywhere. And bloody frack this and frack that and fuck knows what. Like, in some ways, I don't want to know. Like it's just too fucking depressing... I just don't want to think about the rest of that shit. What can you do? You're locked in a fucking house!

How to talk about literally anything other than the pandemic, the present ecological catastrophe and anticipated austerity, was on Sabine's mind even in the first weeks of the local outbreak. Many speculated that the isolation of the lockdowns had undermined much of the strength that the climate movement had grown over previous years. Sam reckoned that people in her circles were looking somewhat hopefully to the State to make its next emergency decree.

The thing that pisses me off sometimes is that it's like everybody, well not everybody, a lot of people, have forgotten about bushfires and all that and it's like 'oh Scott Morrison he's such a great leader,

he locked us down just in time.’ And it’s like ‘Yeah... whatever.’

Like many others, Sam was feeling anxious about all the news stories likely to be drowned out by covid-19.

Politically... I feel like under the cover of covid all this crap has been happening behind our backs that we’ve not had any power to stop. So, when we can get back out to it there’s a lot more work to be done.

### Questioning normal

*How do you feel about the future? Will things go back to normal?*

As day to day life changed for people, longing for the familiar and for a quick return ‘back to normal’ existed alongside desire for some aspects of life to remain changed. Sam said,

I’m hoping [things] don’t go completely back to normal.

Already in April, Sam missed some things from the initial lockdown period, with restrictions being lighter at the time of our conversation.

I miss the quiet, I miss the fact that now traffic is starting back up and there are people hanging around. It was nice to not hear anything apart from nature for a little while.

Grace saw the circumstances as an opportunity to reduce work.

I hope that we can get rid of this idea that we have to work 35 hours a week at our office. I think that

there’s been an upsurge in people recognising the amount of work that we do outside of our office hours. There’s been an acceptance that we do a lot of community work and a lot of care work, like parents are doing a shit tonne of work outside of the office. I think people are going to find it hard to adjust to the 35 hour work week. A lot of people are like we can’t go back to that, we don’t want to, and we have to prioritise other things in our lives.

We missed being in close relationship and connection to ourselves, each other and country. But how connected were we before the virus hit? It seems our longings were less desires for a perpetual normal, and more for rupture from a colonial capitalist norm.

### No Turning Back

While rapid responses to the covid crisis initially signaled hope that the seismic shifts required to meet challenges of broader crises are possible, the way in which restructure happens and in whose interest the changes serve is grounds for struggle. Much has happened since we held these humble conversations in a regional city on Dharawal Country. The number of cases globally has continued to rise. Throughout this period important struggles emerged. In so-called Australia, Melbourne has spent 112 days in stages 4 and 5 of lockdown. Prior to the city-wide restrictions in Melbourne, the Flemington public housing towers were subject to racially targeted policing and lockdown. Later, workers across a range of workplaces in Melbourne went on

strike to shut down their workplaces and to institute adequate safety measures.

In New South Wales, where restrictions on business activity had eased some months ago, the public health act has been used to police protests and demonstrations, shutting down BLM protests, demonstrations against job losses, and attacks on university student conditions. Police have issued around \$50,000 worth of fines at demonstrations in Sydney. In NSW, we can already see that even as covid-restrictions ease, the management of the economic crisis will involve the entwining of policing, aspects of public health, and austerity. These features and others will mark the terrain of struggle for the near future.

As we move away from the initial shock of the pandemic, opportunities to capitalise on the crisis proliferate. From the National Covid-19 Coordination Commission being stacked with fossil fuel executives pushing for the expansion of a natural gas led recovery to the privatisation of covid tracking systems, to the latest budget channeling government ‘welfare’ spending towards business, we see that once again there is money to be made

in crisis and that real change will not come from above.

Crises tend to deepen the contradictions within the state, as well as between sectors of capital. The pandemic crisis has provoked a similar situation, as various elements of the state and capital compete and seek to establish a new basis for the reproduction of profit. Against this backdrop, we are met with intensifying austerity measures, invasive surveillance systems, targeted policing, threats to protest rights, harsher border and migration control, and a generally more militarised response to the pandemic. It is apparent that we are now struggling against a ‘worse normal.’ Such fights are happening around us here in the Illawarra and elsewhere. Struggles for black lives, to protect Country, workers’ struggles from the ports to fast food to aged care, community mutual aid efforts, collective reorganisations of care, struggles for the rights of prisoners, trans folks, refugees, students, for housing and for welfare are all critical and ongoing. It’s clear that there can be no return to a world before the pandemic and that the relationships we build now are the grounds for our futures in common.





The background of the entire image is a solid red color. Overlaid on this red background is a white fingerprint pattern. The pattern consists of numerous concentric, wavy lines that form a circular shape, resembling a fingerprint. The lines are more densely packed in some areas and more spread out in others, creating a sense of depth and texture. The overall effect is a high-contrast, visually striking design.

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